

Beauty and Truth in Euripides' *Ion*

Of the extant plays of Euripides, *Ion* is one of the most striking in its emphasis on the majesty and significance of the earth and of the beauty of art (Mastrorarde, 2013). The plot of *Ion* also revolves to a great degree on both truth and falsehood, and good and bad judgment, whether human or divine (see Melzer, 2006). Indeed, upon considering the actions of the major characters, it becomes clear that their ability to understand the significance of the land — particularly that of Athens— and to appreciate the aesthetics in and around the temple of Apollo at Delphi serves as an index of their moral and intellectual development.

The parentless Ion, who lives at the temple, begins the play with lyrics (82-153) of the area's beauty and related human creations. He excepts only the birds, swans and an eagle which he threatens to kill because they disturb the temple and rituals. The birds, however, are omens of the gods (the swans later die after consuming poison meant for him), and Ion's lack of insight into this ambiguity is representative of his own situation and personality.

Ion claims strong ethics (643-4 δίκαιον εἶναί μ' ὁ νόμος ἢ φύσις θ' ἄμα παρῆχε τῶθεω) and uses fifth-century argumentation (see Conacher, 1998). He has an adolescent's distaste for nuance. Confronted with Creusa's confession that Apollo raped "a friend," Ion decides to advise Apollo (436-7 νοθετητέος δέ μοι Φοῖβος) that the gods risk emptying their temples in recompense for injustice (447 ἄδικίας). Later, told that Xuthus is his father, Ion grills him in a Socratic-style elenchus about the identity of his mother (lines) and, himself outspoken despite his origin, claims that "those able to be wise" should be quiet (598 σιγῶσι) in Athenian politics. Ion's determination finally leads him to the priestess, who reconnects him with his homeland through his mother and the legitimacy they represent. Ion's directness is effective but does not resolve whether Apollo's oracle to Xuthus is true if (1537 ἀληθής) if Apollo is Ion's father.

Creusa, a descendant of Athens' founder, has profound connections with both the land (cf. especially 20-21 and 266-269) and the cave where she abandons her infant (Loraux, 1990). Unfortunately, her understanding is incomplete. Persuaded by the weak arguments of the chorus and tutor, she nearly poisons her own son. The limitations of her aesthetic vision echo this misjudgment. She leaves unfinished the weaving depicting the gorgon which she gives her newborn (1419-21); likewise, she does not share everyone else's pleasure in seeing Delphi (245-6).

Xuthus's practical and social connections with the land allow him to sacrifice to the god and host a banquet; the artistry lies with Ion's choice of tapestries for the tent. Xuthus's unsophisticated rhetoric and judgment underscore his practicality. Apollo's oracle declaring that Ion is a gift (δῶρον) from Apollo but ἐξ ἔμοῦ (537), with Xuthus understanding ἔμοῦ as referring to him and not Apollo, is either ambiguous or a lie in biological terms (Owen, 1957, *inter alios*), but Xuthus does not consider the implications. Xuthus then admits that he was too happy to ask the obvious question about the identity of his son's mother (540). Overall, Xuthus exhibits conventional piety; he claims that his son shows good reason (557 εὐφρονεῖς) by not distrusting the god.

None of the characters are able to resolve the ambiguities of here and there and truth and falsehood. Athena's concluding speech, which leaves Xuthus partially in the dark, persuades Ion and Creusa to believe Apollo. Ion receives Athena's words (1607 λόγους) and, contradicting earlier pronouncements, stands convinced (πεῖθομαι) that Apollo was not "untrustworthy" before (1609 ἄπιστον; cf. 1607 ἄπιστόν). The clearest resolution is Creusa's new-found understanding of the beauty of the gates of Delphi (1609-13). Nevertheless, Ion's aesthetic and moral sophistication, representing the quasi-familial relationship of the Ionians and Athenians, is

relevant to what relationship, if any, the characters bear to contemporary political figures (see Swift, 2008, Martin, 2010, Vickers, 2014).

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